
How to Achieve More with Less: Managing Probation When Facing a Reduction in Resources

*Thomas F. White,
Director of Operations,
Connecticut Judicial Branch,
Court Support Services
Division*

Any discussion of how an agency responds to cutbacks and shortfalls in its operating budget can best be understood within the context of its organizational structure and its articulated vision and mission. In Connecticut, the Judicial Branch operates adult and juvenile probation services as part of a statewide unified system. The Judicial Branch's Court Support Services Division (CSSD), which was established in 1999, is responsible for the day-to-day management of all probation services.

From July 1992 to July 1999, the number of adult probation cases in Connecticut increased by approximately 20%, while over the same period of time, the number of adult probation staff decreased by 15%. After the creation of the CSSD, a strategic planning process was initiated that resulted in the state legislature establishing 60 additional adult probation officer positions. In addition, 25 new juvenile probation officer positions were created through a federal grant. At present, there are 300 adult probation officers and 135 juvenile probation officers in Connecticut, and there are approximately 48,000 adults and 2,700 juveniles under probation supervision.

Since the formation of the CSSD, both adult and juvenile probation services have undergone extensive study and review. Relying heavily on the latest empirical research on the effectiveness of correctional treatment interventions, we are confident of the following evidence-based conclusions concerning crime causation and treatment:

- ◆ **Recidivism can be predicted.** Offender recidivism is predictable, and it can be reduced by using validated risk assessments to identify and address "criminogenic needs"—those needs that we know lead to or cause crime and delinquency.
- ◆ **Risk factors for re-offending can be identified.** Offender assessment instruments that identify criminogenic needs are inextricably linked to offender rehabilitation and public protection.
- ◆ **Recidivism can be reduced.** If an offender's criminogenic needs are addressed and positively changed, he or she will be significantly less likely to recidivate.

Connecticut's Probation Risk Reduction Program

As a result of this review, the Judicial Branch in Connecticut is developing a comprehensive risk reduction program for juvenile and adult probation. This program comprises four elements that will ensure continuous improvement of CSSD services to the Connecticut courts and communities.

1) Risk/needs assessment and classification system—CSSD has identified and implemented new risk/needs assessment tools for adult and juvenile probation, along with corresponding probationer classification and supervision standards. Findings from these instruments will provide critical information that will help the Judicial Branch increase public safety by improving program services that can reduce recidivism for both adult and juvenile probationers.

2) Center for Best Practices—CSSD has recently established a Center for Best Practices. The purpose of the Center is threefold:

- ◆ Evaluation of evidence-based research concerning effective correctional programs.
- ◆ Collaboration with private, non-profit (CSSD-funded) agencies to determine how their programs and services can best respond to client and community needs.
- ◆ Development and implementation of standardized program models and treatment interventions that incorporate the principles of effective correctional programs.

3) Community-based probation—CSSD is committed to the statewide development of community-based probation. Probation officers will be working in the community in close collaboration with community organizations, schools, the courts, social service agencies, program providers, and law enforcement agencies.

4) Three-year longitudinal study of adult and juvenile clients—CSSD has contracted with a private consulting firm to evaluate the programming initiatives that will result from the Probation Risk Reduction Program.

The principles of the Probation Risk Reduction Program are to supervise and treat the offenders under probation supervision according to the risk they pose to public safety; to match the degree or level of supervision and treatment to their level of risk; to identify appropriate targets of evidence-based rehabilitative programming that addresses the offender's assessed criminogenic needs; and to employ modes of treatment interventions that are consistent with the ability and developmental level of the offender.

Connecticut's Probation Risk Reduction Program is being developed through the hard work and commitment of CSSD managers and line staff. It is our shared

vision that, when fully operational, adult and juvenile probation in the state of Connecticut will reflect the following:

- ◆ A validated assessment and classification system will provide probation officers with the ability to adjust the level of supervision and treatment to the risk and needs of each probationer.
- ◆ Empirically supported treatment services and programs will be available to address the identified criminogenic needs of offenders under supervision, reducing the probability of future criminal behavior.
- ◆ Probation officers and service providers will be skilled in Motivational Interviewing and will use the skills when interacting with clients and peers.
- ◆ Probation officers will be trained in cognitive-behavioral interventions and will be conducting treatment groups for targeted offenders under supervision.
- ◆ Teams of probation officers will be assigned geographically to serve specific neighborhoods and communities.
- ◆ Probation teams will be working in collaboration with each other and will develop partnerships with local law enforcement agencies, service providers, and community institutions and associations.
- ◆ An automated case management information system will be in place that is linked to law enforcement agencies and service providers.
- ◆ A comprehensive quality assurance and evaluation system will be in place to improve supervision and treatment services.

Deploying Resources Within the Context of Risk Reduction

Often when it is projected that a state or county is going to be facing budgetary shortfalls, a freeze is placed on hiring, and staff vacancies cannot be filled. When this occurs, agency administrators need to clearly articulate, within the context of the agency mission, how they will respond to the freeze and how they will distribute the inevitable increase in staff workloads.

The CSSD is currently faced with a hiring freeze as well as a reduction in our overall operating budget. As a result, what we are communicating to elected officials, other state agencies, our staff, and the community is that we will deploy our available probation resources in accordance with the principles of our Probation Risk Reduction Program. Our staff will allocate their time and effort to probationers who have been assessed as having the highest probability of engaging in further criminal activities. Therefore, they will prioritize their supervision efforts using established supervision standards based on the client's assessed risk, from

highest to lowest. Although this may result in more probationers having minimal or no face-to-face contact with their probation officer, during a period of diminishing resources it is a responsible public safety approach.

In a time of declining resources, an agency needs to state its priorities and be honest about what it can and cannot do. We need to be careful not to deceive ourselves or the community into believing that we will continue to provide the same level of service as before. If a reduction in privately contracted treatment resources becomes necessary, offenders will continue to be placed in available services based on their level of risk and need. The CSSD is committed to providing services consistent with what the current research supports and to conduct agency practice in a manner that is accountable. It is therefore our intention to make any future reductions in programmatic resources based on our Center for Best Practices' evaluative data on "what works."

Workload Equalization

With the prospect of more offenders being placed on probation with fewer staff, we recognize the importance of equalizing our probation officers' workloads—not caseloads. Staff are often willing to do more when they believe that the distribution of work is fair and the "pain" is being equally shared. Probation officers in Connecticut are assigned cases geographically based on an offender's level of risk. Work units have been established for each risk level, and workloads are balanced among officers as much as possible. Each officer's work units are calculated monthly and available to all probation staff, thus making workload equalization visible for everyone to monitor.

This process takes on an added importance during times of staff shortages. Again, if staff believe that they are being treated fairly and if the agency makes them feel important and cared about, they will usually rise to the occasion and do their part to respond to a cutback in resources.

Managing Staff in a Period of Budget Cutbacks

Agency employees want administrators to recognize their work as important, and they want to know that the agency cares about them. It becomes even more important for administrators to communicate their appreciation when operating budgets are decreasing, the number of clients is increasing, and employees are asked to do more with less. It is essential for administrators to communicate this positive message to staff through what they say and, even more importantly, to demonstrate their commitment to staff by what they do.

One way to let staff know that they are the agency's most valuable resource is to invest in their own growth and development by not cutting staff training programs during difficult economic times. The message that is sent to staff about their importance will be as valuable as the training itself. It is also important not to reduce or to fail to maintain staff safety equipment; to do so would send all the wrong messages to staff at a time when their workload is likely to increase.

Keeping a Budget Crisis From Becoming a Personnel Crisis

When probation officers' workloads become unmanageable, or are believed to be unmanageable, staff attitude and performance can deteriorate. Staff can feel so overwhelmed that they become powerless and start to lose faith in the purpose of what they are doing. In reality, they may not be working harder, but they believe that they are putting more into their work than they are receiving in return. The personal gratification and self-fulfillment that they once felt become a faint memory of their "good old days." They begin to believe that the job has become so impossible that they cannot do it—and so they stop trying to do it. What was a budget crisis becomes a personnel crisis that over time can negatively affect the organizational culture.

When this occurs, the agency's attempts to provide direction and re-establish staff accountability are viewed as both unrealistic and uncaring. Having traveled down this road before in my career, I am hopeful that the straightforward and honest approach we are taking in response to having to manage with fewer resources will prevent this from happening in our agency.

In the final analysis, it is often not what we do but rather how we do it that determines whether we succeed or fail. When we face a potential budget crisis, it is a time for action. We should not circle the wagons but charge ahead. It is not a time to require less, it is a time to require more. It is also an opportunity to reaffirm what is important, what our values are, and what we believe in. It is a time to stand up and be counted, to move forward with conviction and determination to achieve the agency's vision and mission. ■

For more information:

*Thomas F. White
Director of Operations
Connecticut Judicial Branch
Court Support Services
Division
2274 Silas Dean Highway
Rocky Hill, Connecticut 06067
Telephone: 860-563-7057
Fax: 860-721-9474
E-mail:
thomas.white@jud.state.ct.us*